
Food Stamp Program

The Food Stamp Program is the first line of defense against hunger for millions of families throughout the Nation. Eligible participants receive benefits to purchase food at authorized food stores and farmers markets. Restaurants and group feeding sites can be authorized to accept food stamps for meals provided to the homeless, elderly, and people with disabilities. Eligibility and benefits are based largely on household size, income, and assets.

Over half of all participants are children, one out of six is elderly, and a third live in households with at least one person who works. Although the Food Stamp Program is designed to help anyone with little income and few resources purchase a nutritious diet, less than 65 percent of those eligible actually receive food stamps. Only one-third of eligible seniors and less than one-half of households with earnings participate.

Food stamps help those in need improve their nutrition and health. For children, a better diet means better learning in school. For adults, it means better performance on the job, or a better foundation for developing the job skills that can give them and their families independence. For seniors, it means access to a balanced diet vital to their nutritional well-being. For everyone, participation can help stretch limited budgets, improve nutrition, and reduce the risk of diet-related health problems.

Community Involvement

- ☐ Does your community have active programs of public education and assistance to inform people in need about their potential eligibility for food stamps?
- ☐ Has your community established public-private partnerships to support public information, education, and enrollment assistance?
- ☐ Is there a widely publicized toll-free number that people in need can call for local food stamp information and assistance?



Active community involvement is crucial to identifying, informing, and reaching out to people who may need and qualify for food stamp assistance. Many people eligible for benefits never receive them. Some may not be aware of their potential eligibility and the help that food stamps can provide. Some may not know how to apply or may find the application process too difficult. Some may find it difficult to get to an office, especially when the office is not nearby. Some may be stigmatized by the mistaken impression that nutrition assistance is the same as welfare. Active community involvement in public information and assistance can help overcome these barriers.

Local Office Functions

- ☐ Does the food stamp office provide evening and weekend hours to accommodate the needs of clients who may be working, job hunting, or have child care problems during normal office hours?
- ☐ Does the food stamp office “outstation” workers at locations that accommodate the elderly, homebound, people with disabilities, and rural clients?

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- ☐ Does the local food stamp office accommodate the needs of clients when scheduling appointments, promptly reschedule missed appointments, and accept “walk-in” applicants on an emergency basis?

Flexible office hours, locations, and scheduling policies are a basic characteristic of high-quality customer service. Although not required by current regulations, these services enhance client access. Clients can find it difficult and costly to take time off from work. Impaired mobility is often a problem for the elderly and people with disabilities. Day care schedules can often constrain working parents.

- ☐ Does the local food stamp office actively seek feedback on customer satisfaction with the services it provides?

The best way to find out if the services provided meet customer needs is to ask. Local food stamp offices should provide a means for measuring customer satisfaction in order to foster high-quality service.

Enrollment Assistance

- ☐ Does the food stamp office provide applications for food stamps on request? **REQUIRED**
- ☐ Does the food stamp office always inform clients that they can apply for benefits immediately by signing an application? **REQUIRED**
- ☐ Does the food stamp office determine quickly if applicants are eligible for expedited service? **REQUIRED**
- ☐ Does the food stamp office provide a user-friendly checklist of documentation needed to complete an application?

- ☐ How fast does the food stamp office process applications?

Food stamp offices must provide applications on request, in person, or by mail. Offices should make applications and program-related materials available in appropriate languages other than English. Community groups can distribute food stamp applications outside of the office. Clients are entitled to file an application the same day they request one, an important right because benefits are retroactive to the date of application. Local offices must reach a decision on each application within 30 days. Some households with very low income and limited resources may qualify for expedited benefits within 7 days. However, most applications can be processed much more quickly.

- ☐ Does your community offer food stamp application assistance services?
- ☐ Does your community have pre-screening services available to help clients determine potential eligibility?

Many people who need food stamps are discouraged or overwhelmed by the application process. They may lack transportation, telephones, copying machines, and child care. They may lack adequate life skills such as the ability to read, follow directions, or overcome fears on their own. Some may be too ill to complete the application process. Supportive assistance from the community can help.

- ☐ Are clients clearly informed of their right to a fair hearing? **REQUIRED**

If clients encounter unfair treatment or believe their food stamp applications have not been handled properly, they have the right to request a fair hearing. Clients can contact the local food stamp office in writing or verbally. The fair hearing is conducted with an impartial official who is required by law to review the facts of every case in a fair and objective manner.

Referrals

- ☐ Does the food stamp office “outstation” case-workers in other agencies and locations serving the same population?
- ☐ Does the food stamp office have agreements and procedures in place with other agencies to make referrals to appropriate services and programs?
- ☐ Does the food stamp office regularly inform families with children that they may be automatically eligible for free school meals and WIC benefits and refer them to the appropriate office?

People in need seek out assistance in a variety of locations: social security offices, food pantries, meal programs, health clinics, elderly feeding programs, and community centers. Appropriate program referrals can help meet client needs as effectively and conveniently as possible. For example, children in families enrolled in the Food Stamp Program may be automatically eligible for free school meals. Similarly, pregnant women, infants, and young children may be automatically eligible for supplemental nutrition benefits through the WIC Program. The food stamp office can work actively with school and public health officials to ensure that they share necessary information across agencies to maximize use of the nutrition assistance programs.

Managing the Transition From Welfare to Work

- ☐ Does the food stamp office routinely inform people who leave welfare that they may still be eligible for food stamps?

Proper nutrition and sufficient food are as critical to the successful transition from welfare to work as child care and health insurance. The importance of nutrition support may not diminish as families leave welfare for jobs. For some, working full time throughout the year at minimum wage is not enough to lift their families out of poverty; they continue to need

nutrition assistance. However, many families leave welfare with the mistaken impression that they are no longer eligible for food stamps once they find work. The local food stamp office can correct this misperception by informing families of the possibility of continued eligibility.

Services to Immigrants

- ☐ Does the local food stamp office provide program information in appropriate languages to immigrants and their children about their potential eligibility for food stamps?
- ☐ Does your State take advantage of the option to provide food stamp benefits to immigrants with State funds if they do not qualify for the Federal program?

Many legal immigrants may be confused about their eligibility for food stamp benefits. While many are no longer eligible, some still are. Children born in the United States to immigrant parents are eligible for food stamps even if their parents are not. Recent regulations issued by the Federal Government ensure that immigrants' participation in the Food Stamp Program (or other nutrition assistance programs) will not adversely affect their immigration status. States may also exercise their option to offer supplemental nutrition assistance with State funding for some immigrants who are no longer eligible for participation in the Federal program.

Nutrition Education

- ☐ Does your community have a nutrition education program readily available to food stamp participants? Is it coordinated with other nutrition education activities provided by WIC, USDA's |Extension Service, and FNS' Team Nutrition?

Because there is a strong link between good nutrition and good health, food stamp recipients should receive guidance on how to stretch their food dollars, make healthful food choices, and prepare foods safely.

FOOD STAMP PROGRAM

WHAT YOU CAN DO:

- Seek out local community, religious, and other organizations to form partnerships dedicated to improving program availability and service.
- Build partnerships with local and State food stamp offices to establish programs of public information, outreach, and enrollment assistance.
- Build partnerships with civic leaders to raise awareness and understanding of the importance of nutrition assistance programs to the health and well-being of all individuals.

FNS CAN HELP:

- More information about the Food Stamp Program is available at www.fns.usda.gov/fsp.
- Policies announced in July 1999 will help ensure working families access to food stamps by making it easier to own a car and still be eligible for food stamps, simplifying reporting requirements, and creating a nationwide public education campaign and toll-free hotline (1-800-221-5689) to help people find out if they are eligible for food stamps.
- Informational posters, brochures, and flyers can be readily downloaded from the FNS web site. Separate materials appropriate for the general public, the working poor, seniors, and immigrants are available in both English and Spanish. A CD-ROM containing the complete camera-ready printing files is available to those able to print this material commercially. Look for the materials at www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/fsp-outreach1.
- *Preparing Nutritious Meals at Minimal Costs* provides information for educators and others to teach people on a tight budget how to prepare foods for a healthful diet. The booklet contains two sample meal plans (two weekly menus, 40 recipes, and two food lists), tips for nutritious meals at minimal costs, and a resource list for additional information. You can download the booklet in PDF format from the Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion web site (www.usda.gov/cnpp). For single copies, call 202-418-2312.
- The Food and Nutrition Information Center home page is a great place to start your search for nutrition information. It has many publications on nutrition and provides an excellent jumping off point for other good sources of nutrition information. Through a partnership with FNS, the Food and Nutrition Information Center provides direct loans of materials to people working for many USDA nutrition assistance programs. Check out its web site at www.nal.usda.gov/fnic.